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Cracks in the Glass Slipper: Does It Really "Get Better" for LGBTQ Youth, or Is It Just Another Cinderella Story?

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Abstract

This study examines narratives of the 20 most popular video submissions to the *It Gets Better Project* campaign to explore how they create a shared story around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. The results suggest that while the movement has garnered global attention from activists and scholars, much of the discourses that have traditionally framed LGBTQ youth as *at-risk* are perpetuated in the narratives of the campaign. A dominant Cinderella myth emerges that, despite offering alternative discourses, continues to frame LGBTQ youth as in need of saving and following a fairy tale trajectory of falling in love and being saved by his/her prince(ss) charming.

Keywords

activism, adolescence, narrative, LGBTQ, social movements and media

In September 2010, Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller, in response to numerous gay youth suicides, uploaded an eight-and-a-half-minute video to YouTube speaking of their struggles as gay youth and experiences with harassment and bullying. Their message was that ultimately life got better once they

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got through high school. The video propelled a worldwide movement, receiving submissions from individuals, celebrities, organizations, corporations, religious groups, universities and colleges, and politicians. In October 2010, the resulting *It Gets Better Project* moved from a campaign to an organization, leading ultimately to the establishment of itgetsbetter.org.

According to the organization's mission statement, the overall goal of the project is to "communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them". As of January 2014, more than 60,000 user-created testimonials of how life *gets better* have surfaced from participants worldwide and have been viewed more than 50 million times (B. Peters, personal communication, February 17, 2014). The project has more than 356,000 followers on Facebook, nearly 110,000 followers on Twitter, and has garnered a critical mass of contributors and supporters, gaining the attention of mainstream audiences.

Although scholars have examined the construction of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in academic and activist discourses, few studies have examined digitally mediated representations of LGBTQ youth. The *It Gets Better Project* offers an opportunity to examine these representations and explore how the movement reifies and challenges traditional narratives of youth. This purpose of this study is to determine the dominant narratives embedded in the 20 most popular contributions to the project and to explore how they challenge or reinforce cultural myths surrounding LGBTQ youth. The videos examined in this research revealed a narrative that evinced a number of fairy tale characteristics, in line with Propp's (1968) characterization. The aim of this inquiry was not to construct a detailed analysis of the project as a fairy tale but to use the narrative outline of the fairy tale to provide an understanding of the campaign and how it plays into the broader landscape of LGBTQ equality.

Literature Review

Dominant Narratives of LGBTQ Youth

Following the release of the 1989 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' "Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide," which revealed that gay and lesbian youth commit some 30% of teen suicides, numerous scholars and advocates took up the topic of at-risk LGBTQ youth. Studies presented statistics and narratives related to suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, homelessness, dropping out, depression, and verbal and physical assaults (Jennings, 1999; Sedgwick, 1993; Uribe & Harbeck, 1991). The result is that much academic and activist literature has characterized LGBTQ young people through tropes of *at-riskness* for self-harm

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and suicidality (Rasmussen, 2006; Rasmussen, Rofes, & Talburt, 2004). These "tropes of risk" (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 135) have become part of the rhetoric of LGBTQ scholarship and activism, serving a legitimizing function for LGBTQ organizations, the existence of which is dependent on mobilizing political and financial support for services to support LGBTQ people and issues.

The relationship between LGBTQ identity and suicidality, however, has been contested within the medical, psychological, and social work literatures (Remafedi, 1999; Russell, 2003; Savin-Williams, 2001a, 2001b). Some literature presents the relationship between LGBT identity and the risk of suicidality as settled. Other scholars contest this claim, suggesting instead that methodological challenges associated with researching suicidality, particularly issues of sampling and the quantification of identity and measurement of suicide risk, have resulted in questionable reliability (Russell, 2003; Savin-Williams, 2001a, 2001b).

More recent research recognizes that LGBTQ youth are not a homogenous *at-risk* group and that the range of experience and the effects of risk-based rhetoric warrant investigation (Cover, 2012; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Fenaughty & Harré, 2003; Marshall, 2010; Rasmussen, 2006; Rasmussen et al., 2004; Savin-Williams, 2001a, 2001b; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). For example, Driver (2008) observes that as queer youth become the object of study in popular and academic texts, the language used to describe them "often ends up foreclosing the ambiguous, desiring, relational, and ephemeral dimensions of their experiences" (p. 3). While some scholars have attempted to affirm the agency and empowerment of queer youth (e.g., Gray, 2009; Owens, 2003), too often researchers, educators, and youth development workers, in advocating for LGBTQ youth, have invoked the image of a suffering, isolated, and suicidal young person.

In dominant narratives, then, queer youth are often constructed as victims and associated with pathological conditions and oppressive associations, such as psychic trauma, alienation, and shame. As Talburt (2004) writes:

> Queer youth suicide became a refrain, such that article after article, essay after essay, and report after report portrayed youth as at risk through statistics on queer youth suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, homelessness, dropping out, depression, verbal and physical assaults, and so on. (p. 28)

The *Its Get Better Project* was designed to create a digital space for an alternative narrative to emerge. The project's founder, Dan Savage (Reed, 2013), claims the campaign is not just messages of hope; rather, "there is an act of real cultural defiance at the heart of the It Gets Better Project" (para. 8) designed to result in social change. This study, then, asks the following research questions.

> RQ1: What narratives does the *It Gets Better Project* construct about LGBTQ youth in the 20 most popular videos on the site?

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RQ2: How do these narratives challenge the dominant cultural narrative surrounding LGBTQ youth?

RQ3: How do these narratives reinforce the dominant cultural narratives surrounding LGBTQ youth?

RQ4: To the extent the videos might fit the fairy tale structure, what implication does this have for the LGBTQ youth viewing the videos?

Method

To answer these questions, this study used narrative analysis. As Fisher (1984) noted, the world is a set of stories from which we choose and constantly re-create our lives: "At the individual level, people make sense of their lives through the stories available to them, and they attempt to fill their lives with available stories. People live by stories" (Richardson, 1990, p. 129). Thus, individuals approach their social world through the framework of narrative, making decisions and acting within this structure (Fisher, 1984). Narratives are used to explain who people are, why events happen, how people act and respond, and what people value. Ultimately, narratives convey social truths (Riessman, 1993) and create a world that is particular, sharable, and personal (Klapproth, 2004).

Narrative teaches individuals about their world and how to narrate their place within it (Watson, 2008), allowing for the interpretation of reality through a particular expression of experience and organizing the "stimuli of our experience so that we can make sense of the people, places, events, and actions of our lives" (Foss, 2009, p. 307). The narrative creates, for both the storyteller and the audience, a personal involvement in the narrated world and the act of narrative. Specific and detailed descriptions and images provoke listeners' personal imaginations, reminding them of their own past experiences and allowing them to connect their experiences with that of the storyteller (Foss, 2009).

Narrative analysis provides the analytic tools to deconstruct the politics of narrative and the degree to which they "support or contest social structures and practices" (Jackson, 1998, p. 62). Foss (2009) identified four characteristics that distinguish narrative from other rhetorical forms. The dominant defining feature of narrative discourse is that it is made up of two events that may be either active or stative. Second, narrative discourse is organized by time and is not simply a random series of events but rather is a sequence of events. Third, narratives must include a causal relationship between earlier and later events in the story. Last, the narrative must be about cohesive subject. What distinguishes narrative from other forms of discourse is that it establishes for both the storyteller and the audience a "personal involvement in the narrated world and the act of narrative" (Foss, 2009, p. 308).

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One form of narrative is fairy tales, or stories that have been shaped over centuries of retelling and have achieved a basic narrative structure that is a "basic distillation" of human experience (Jones, 2002, p. 5). Propp (1968) examined fairy tales and categorized them into seven basic characters (villain, dispatcher, helper, princess and father, donor, hero, and false hero) and 31 temporal stages, from the hero leaving home to the wedding and a happily-ever-after ending. Analysis of the video data revealed that the emerging narratives followed an abbreviated version of Propp's characters and narrative structure, as outlined in the results section. In this study, then, Propp's version of narrative analysis provides an insightful way to examine the mediated communication of the *It Gets Better Project* advocacy campaign to identify and deconstruct the dominant stories embedded in the text.

Sample: It Gets Better Project

The texts selected for analysis were the 20 videos posted to the *It Gets Better Project* Web site by individuals and organizations that had the largest number of views. These videos are particularly prominent because audiences have determined that they are in some way enlightening in terms of LGBTQ advocacy. Additionally, the *It Gets Better Project* has been well recognized for its advocacy work on behalf of LGBTQ youth. In March 2011, a book of essays from the project was released, and in April, it reached *The New York Times* Best Seller list. At the 64th Emmy Awards, the project was awarded the Governor's Award by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences for utilizing media strategically and creatively to educate and inspire. As of August 2014, the organization has 14 international affiliate programs: Australia, Austria, Chile, Denmark, Italy, Jamaica, Moldova, Mexico, Paraguay, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

As the central hub of the organization, the official Web site is a place where visitors can *take action* and get involved by making a donation, recording and sharing a video, taking a pledge, purchasing items (e.g., clothing and books), and connecting to the organization's other social media sites (i.e., Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). The homepage of the organization's Web site (itgetsbetter.org) features a *Popular Videos* tab that has the 20 most viewed videos embedded on the site. On the organization's YouTube page, videos can be ranked by the number of times they have been viewed. Videos were filtered by view count. Table 1 lists the videos examined in this study and their number of views as of August 2014.

Findings

Propp's (1968) understanding of narrative mirroring of fairy tale tropes offers a lens by which we can understand deeper meanings of the video texts. However,

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Table 1. List of Most Popular Video Contributions to the *It Gets Better Project*.

Video	Description	Number of views
AreYouSurprised	YouTube celebrity	7,295,595
Ke$ha	Pop music artist	2,354,135
Joel Burns	Fort Worth City Councilman	2,963,508
Dan Savage and Terry Miller	Syndicated columnist	2,024,346
Jamey Rodemeyer	14-year-old who committed suicide after producing video	1,896,752
Barack Obama	President of the United States	1,532,280
Adam Lambert	Pop music artist	1,490,595
Pixar employees	Film studio	1,466,522
Zachary Quinto	Actor	1,298,981
Chris Colfer	Actor	1,215,666
Google employees	Technology corporation	1,076,997
Facebook employees	Social media network	1,017,474
Sarah Silverman	Comedian	917,675
Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles	Musical ensemble	914,799
Sassy Gay Friend	YouTube celebrity	825,065
Tim Gunn	Actor	738,812
Lady Gaga	Artist	686,916
Stephen Colbert	Political satirist	665,388
Lala and Ciara	Pop music artist	622,521
Hilary Clinton	Secretary of State	605,043
Apple employees	Technology corporation	596,613

this research condenses Propp's stages, eliminating several narrative moments, deemphasizing the narrative units of the villain plot found in Propp's theory, and highlighting units of the hero(ine) narrative that structure the story. As such, this article proposes that this modification of the theory helps to expand areas of narrative and advocacy communication, specifically in regard to LGBTQ youth, while retaining key elements of the theory such as a structural approach to narrative development and an analysis providing useful tools for understanding contemporary stories.

RQ1 asked what narrative the project constructs about LGBTQ youth in the most popular videos on the site. Findings reveal that the narratives that emerged from the sample of *It Gets Better Project* videos examined highlight characteristics that greatly mirror major characters and the storyline of a fairy tale. In a condensed form of Propp's (1968) 31 narrative stages, emergent story lines point to protagonists often living in unfortunate circumstances, but with the help from

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a higher power, they are suddenly exposed to a remarkable fortune and future; while the present may be truly dreadful, there is a promise of a happy ending. Ultimately, fitting with the structure of the fairy tale, the data convey a narrative of optimism; despite roadblocks, the protagonists can live happily ever after.

In particular, the following characters and categories emerged from the texts and help expand our understanding of how these narratives work and how these tropes help create dominant meanings: the Persecuted Hero(ine), Evil Stepmother and Stepsisters, the Fairy Godmother, the Transformation, Happily Ever After, and Alternative Endings.

The Persecuted Hero(ine)

The protagonists of the *It Gets Better Project* videos parallel the Cinderella character of the fairy tale: downtrodden, destitute, and down on her luck. In the fairy tale, Cinderella is tasked with domestic responsibilities, confined to the home, and spends her days doing menial labor. She lives in isolation in the day-to-day monotony of her tasks. The protagonist's isolation and depression is a key theme that emerged from the videos. The video from Google, for example, said: "You feel this magnetism, like you're never going to get out; you're never going to go anywhere. And it really draws you in. And you feel like there's no hope." The stories point to a cataclysmic reality of dead ends and despair.

Narrators presented a worldview where fear and confusion dominate, leading to feelings of isolation. "It got to a point where I was just so scared of everything and of everyone that I wouldn't actually talk to anyone" (Pixar). They used powerful descriptors to illustrate their experiences, describing their circumstances as defined by *anguish* and *despair* making their lives *ugly*, *rough*, *chaotic*, and *unforgiving*. Narrators recounted verbal and physical harassment, often as the target of homophobic name-calling. Similar to Propp's (1968) structure, then, the narrative begins with the hero(ine) needing to leave home in order to begin his or her transformation.

Evil Stepmother and Stepsisters

In the *Cinderella* fairy tale, the stepmother and stepsisters are the oppressors, or villains, who keep Cinderella from achieving her true identity. In several cases in the *It Gets Better Project* videos, the villain of the story was not the bully but family members. While some protagonists convey a sense of familial support after coming out, many suggest being disowned by biological relatives and immediate family members. One employee at Google noted: "I grew up at the dinner table, hearing conversations about how gay people should die of AIDS, how gay people were less than, you know, straight people. And it really caused me to not feel very safe at home." In the videos, families are portrayed as the villains and the home as a toxic space one must escape from.

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The Fairy Godmother

In the tale, a fairy godmother, the magical helper in Propp's (1968) terms, comes to the rescue, making it possible for Cinderella to be her true self and get to the ball. She magically transforms Cinderella into a beauty, bestowing upon her a ball gown and glass slippers. The magical godmother brings with her the hope of the future by making it possible for Cinderella to meet Prince Charming. The campaign videos examined in this article construct a nebulous community of people on the sidelines who love the hero(ines) unconditionally and want to help them to succeed. The videos emphasize that it takes a village; no individual can go it along. In his video, fashion designer Tim Gunn articulated that young people cannot do this on their own: "It really requires a collaboration between you and the people who love you, the people who you can depend upon." Time after time, the larger LGBTQ community is portrayed as a collective safety net, providing a web of support. The videos suggest there is a tangible community of support: "There are a ton of us out here in this world that are just like you who believe in you" (Hilton, 2010).

The Transformation: Coming Out

Propp's (1968) narrative Stage 10 involves the hero(ine) looking to find what is lost or to resolve an inherent lack. In the videos examined from the *It Gets Better Project*, discovering one's sexuality is the veiled secret that can resolve a lack; coming out to oneself is presented as the answer to life's woes. A strong narrative thread is that by coming to terms with one's identity, one can become the person one has always dreamed of becoming. Several videos noted that coming out was simply the beginning of a new life. Apple employees, for example, said coming out "feels like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders" and "it was just incredibly liberating," and "it was probably one of the best things that I'd ever done." The *Sassy Gay Friend* said, "everyone I came out to, my relationship with them got better—my family, my friends, it's great." The messages convey that if you are able to just come out to yourself and the world around you, you will live a better, more authentic and wholesome life. Coming out is the answer to the narrative tension and is what will set young people free.

Accordingly, the narrative takes on a future orientation. As one Pixar employee said, "Don't focus on the problems that you're going through right now. Focus on the greatness of your life that's going to become." The emphasis here is on preparing for the future, for the possibilities that are waiting. Several narrators stress the importance of young people taking control of their lives and, therefore, their futures. LaLa and Ciara noted: "You determine your destiny . . . your life is in your hands . . . you're in total control. You determine where things can go, where they can start with, where they can stop." But the onus is placed on the individual; it is up to young people to think positively, pull themselves up by their bootstraps. With the help of the fairy godmother,

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Cinderella is able to transform into a beauty and make it to the ball. But ultimately, it is Cinderella's responsibility to catch the eye of the prince.

Happily Ever After

In the *It Gets Better* videos, little attention is given to the narrative moment of *the ball*. Instead, the texts fast-forward to the future, skipping over 11 of Propp's (1968) narrative steps and focusing on life once it has gotten *better*. Within the videos, there is a narrative jump from the moments of despair and despondency to the life of contentment and joy, or Propp's Stage 29 (transfiguration) and Stage 31 (wedding). An Apple employee provides an example of this fast-forward in practice: "You feel every sense of freedom and every sense of, 'this is what life is all about.' Enjoying the riches of life. That's the stuff that people shouldn't miss out on." Similarly, the contribution by Pixar employees focuses on what would have been lost if one took his or her own life: "I would have missed great friends, great relationships. Finding my dream job, finding my dream city, finding my dream partner." These quotes reflect how dreams are now a magical reality. The videos end on a positive note, with stories of optimism, professional achievements, and successful relationships.

In several videos, the narrative apex is meeting one's prince(ss) charming. An example is in the video from Pixar: "I got to get married to the love of my life . . . and I get to kiss him and hug him when I walk in the door and that brings me so much joy." Similarly, a video from Apple says, "That feeling of connecting to someone so deeply. Falling in love, and having a partner of almost 14 years." In both instances, emphasis is placed on actualizing one's sexual orientation, of meeting one's prince(ss) charming and living happily ever after.

Alternative Endings

The description of the fairy tale elements as narrative tropes is particularly poignant when contrasted with the few alternative endings. Sometimes, in the videos, Cinderella does not make it to the ball. This is the case in the video contribution by 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer, who made an *It Gets Better* video in May 2011. He committed suicide on September 18, 2011. Several videos pay tribute to the teens who, like Rodemeyer, took their lives in fall 2010. Similarly, several videos allude to a dark past where narrators attempted suicide. One Facebook employee noted: "I told myself that I'd kill myself after my parents were dead because I didn't want to break their heart." There is a recurrent theme of admission of suicidal ideation or attempts to take one's life. Tim Gunn recalled his experience: "I attempted to kill myself, and I'm very happy today that that attempt was unsuccessful." While not explicitly endorsed,

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suicide is presented as an intelligible, viable option that narrators have considered.

Challenging and Reinforcing Narratives of LGBTQ Youth

As highlighted earlier in this article, the dominant trope invoked by many scholars, as well as organizations advocating for LGBTQ youth, has been that of an at-risk, isolated victim. Recently, a small number of scholars have begun to challenge the dominant constructions of victim, contending that such narratives pathologize and universalize, failing to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the experiences of LGBTQ youth and their capacity for agency, creativity, and pleasure (Marshall, 2010; Rasmussen, 2006; Rasmussen et al., 2004; Savin-Williams, 2001a, 2001b; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Therefore, RQ2 asked how the emergent narratives in the project challenge the dominant cultural narrative surrounding LGBTQ youth.

Within the Cinderella tale, the central narrative is of an abused young woman who magically receives help to engage in an activity that would otherwise be unimaginable (Dundes, 1982). Findings reveal that within the *It Gets Better Project* videos, such magical help comes by way of community. Community as a source of salvation emerged as a central theme in the *It Gets Better Project* videos, challenging the dominant cultural narrative of LGBTQ youth as isolated and alone. This queer community is similar to Anderson's (1991) *imagined community*, which owes much of its existence to media. Pullen (2007) draws from Anderson's work and suggests an *imagined gay community* or a self-reflexive recognition of other gays that results from the increased visibility of gay individuals in the media. Pullen's work is largely limited to the study of gay men; this article, however, suggests the concept of an imagined queer community as encompassing multiple sexual and gendered identities as well as allied individuals. Such an imagined queer community creates a unified movement, establishing common bonds with fellow members, developing a sense of *we-ness* through shared experiences and oppression, and instilling a loyalty to a larger movement. This imagined queer community manifests in a cultural consciousness whereby individuals come to recognize one another as belonging to a specific movement. Such an imagined community, as Anderson notes, is only possible when substantial groups of people are in a position to think of themselves "as living lives parallel to those of other substantial groups of people—if never meeting, yet certainly proceeding along the same trajectory" (p. 188).

The danger of constructing an imagined queer community lies in the simplification of individual and collective complexities and differences into a fixed common bond. Within the *It Gets Better Project*, this bond is shared oppression. What the community imagined in the *It Gets Better Project* videos might fail to fully address is the role played by the larger institutional and structural inequalities that are the sources of these oppressions. By focusing on the future, the

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campaign may reify a narrative of oppression and triumph, in which individuals are able to pull themselves up out of darkness if they work hard enough.

Findings also reveal the stories in these videos complicate the dominant narratives of LGBTQ youth, placing an emphasis on agency as central to actualizing a *happily-ever-after* future. Much scholarship regarding Cinderella, for example, has focused on ideological problems the narrative raises for modern audiences, notably that Cinderella is a passive heroine who requires saving (Canton, 1994; Warner, 1994). Unlike the Cinderella story, agency is central to the narratives of the *It Gets Better Project* videos. The message of the videos conveys that a community of support exists, but it is ultimately up to the individual to save him or herself.

While several elements challenge the dominant cultural narrative surrounding LGBTQ youth, RQ3 asked how the emergent narratives in the project reinforce these stories. Although founders of the project vouched the campaign would provide a space for alternative narratives to be shared, in the videos examined in this article, the project often maintains the very dominant narratives of youth as at-risk victims it attempts to dismantle. Findings affirm that so-called *alternative narratives* in the project actually perpetuate the dominant narratives of LGBTQ people and issues, particularly youth, concerning LGBTQ people's vulnerability to isolation, bullying, and suicide. As findings reveal, the stories that emerged from the analysis, by way of narrative stages and characters, largely mirror the victim trope that has dominated much extant scholarly and activist literature on LGBTQ youth.

Marshall (2010) argued the case for challenging the narrative of LGBTQ youth as *always already victim* because such representations police LGBTQ youth. An emphasis on their *at riskness* makes LGBTQ youth objects of empathy (Patton 1996 as cited in Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Therefore, RQ4 asked about the implications for LGBTQ youth viewing the videos. Rasmussen (2006) proposes that constant repetition of *horror stories* of *wounded* LGBTQ youth has various implications, including a focus on individual pathology, precluding a consideration of LGBT agency or processes of heteronormalization that produce and sustain LGBTQ marginalization. The litany of risk-based narratives may also have a distancing or numbing effect, preventing people from recognizing their involvement in the adversity of others (Rasmussen, 2006).

Young people whose realities do not reflect the stories of the most popular videos risk being let down by false promises of a brighter future and happy ending. For some stuck in the day-to-day monotony of adolescence, it may be a struggle to see past the immediate; they may not be able to envision themselves ever getting to the ball. The narrative structure of the *It Gets Better Project* videos raises concerns about LGBTQ persons experiencing a heightened self-recrimination over time as the youth pass to adulthood, and in their personal experience, they see scant evidence of anything actually getting better. Similarly, young people may not be able to relate with the limited stages and characters

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represented in this narrative. These stories present a happy ending, but this may not be the lived reality of young audiences.

None of this is to say that Savage, the employees of the *It Gets Better Project* organization, or any of the other contributors would intend anything but the best for LGBTQ youth viewing the videos, and their efforts to prevent teen suicides by providing hopeful messages should be lauded. However, the analysis in this article reveals the problematic nature of repeating narrative structures which nevertheless mirror a Cinderella style fairy tale: It can overlook structural causes of anti-LGBTQ inequality and bigotry that require attention for any chance of change.

Conclusion

Propp's (1968) approach to narrative theory—systematizing what happens, the order in which events take place, and who performs various actions—provides insight into contemporary story telling. The analysis revealed character types and key events that structured the dominant narratives, illustrating parallels between the Cinderella myth and stories recounted in the *It Gets Better Project* videos. These parallels in turn help to unravel the ways in which deeper meanings may also be carried by the videos to LGBTQ youth culturally attuned to the typical trajectory of fairy tales. This may in turn run the risk of creating marvelous and unrealistic forms of reality, crafting tales of optimism and hope for a better future. It is not to say that offering hope is a bad thing. But one has to wonder what happens when the lived reality of an LGBTQ teen developing into an adult is not recognizable as one of the stories in the videos. As Propp (1928) noted: "Obviously, the fairy tale is born out of life; however, the fairy tale reflects reality only weakly" (p. 96). To the extent that the tales in the videos, echoing these Cinderella themes, fail to capture the wide variety of lived experiences of the viewers, it risks offering empty promises of hope while not actually making things better for young people. Additionally, with the fairy tale trope's emphasis on personal agency (while neglecting structural elements), when youth do not see the *happily ever after* materializing, there is further risk that it will be interpreted and internalized as personal failure. This conclusion supports at least in part what other critics have identified as shortcomings of the well-intentioned project. Critics claim, "the message is wrong" and "misleading" for "a lot of times it doesn't get any better" (Femmephane, 2010, para. 4). Halberstam (2010) called the *It Gets Better Project* "*a sad lie*" for implicitly arguing "the representation of adolescence as a treacherous territory that one must pass through before reaching the safe harbor of adulthood" (para. 2).

The *It Gets Better Project* videos examined here follow a narrative of comfort and idealism, which may be powerful providers of hope to LGBTQ youth. But by comparing and contrasting the rhetorical structure of the video messages

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against the structure of the fairy tale, analysis reveals more complex and problematic layers of communication. The videos present an abbreviated version of the quest to a happily ever after, ignoring many of the larger issues driving the storyline. This has implications for activists and critical scholars who may raise concerns about an overemphasis on individual effort or a natural progression of improvement upon entering adulthood at the cost of failing to address the cultural, structural, and institutional sources of inequality and antipathy for LGBTQ teens.

The campaign has shined light on LGBTQ narratives in a culturally recognizable format, that of the Cinderella fairy tale. Such a format works to show LGBTQ people are just like their heterosexual counterparts, facing the same issues, and hoping for the same fairy tale ending. However, scholar and activists must ask, what are the implications of assuming LGBTQ people are *just like everyone else*? The risk here is flattening out of sexuality and gender into a fairy tale format that overlooks structural and institutional inequalities and that privileges particular identities that more easily fit this story line. The danger then is further marginalizing already marginalized identities.

Analyses suggest the project is a double-edged sword, on the one hand bringing mainstream visibility and attention to issues facing LGBTQ youth, while simultaneously reinforcing problematic representations of LGBTQ youth. Fairy tales provide a feel good ending that is attractive and importantly, fundable. Such messaging needs to accompanied by tangible resources for young people in crisis. Additionally, LGBTQ youth are not a monolithic group but have multiple identities and experiences. While such narrative structures are recognizable and palatable by mainstream audiences, the risk is reducing the complexity of LGBTQ youth to those identities and experiences that fit neatly into the narrative structure. Scholars and advocates need to provide broader representations of LGBTQ identities and explore alternative narratives.

One way scholars can do this is by examining alternative discourses that emerged from the project. While the project consists of more than 60,000 contributions, the findings from this study are not intended to speak to the breadth of messages. This research looked at a nonrandom sample; therefore, the results are not generalizable to the entire campaign. It does, however, speak to the idea of a dominant narrative by looking at the 20 most watched videos. While the analysis suggests a dominant fairy tale narrative in these top 20 videos, further research could also explore other submissions to the project and contributions to countermovements, such as the *Make It Better Project* and *It Doesn't Get Better* videos.[Rachel: Can we italicize these? Yes, I've added.] These alternative stories might challenge more directly the Cinderella style stories which are clearly popular from the *It Gets Better* Web site.

Ultimately, this article provides evidence to support the idea that the best way to for *once upon a time* to reach happily ever after is to simultaneously embrace

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the hopeful possibilities of a campaign like the *It Gets Better Project* while also highlighting alternative narratives that reflect the varied experiences of LGBTQ persons that challenge more directly the structural bigotry found in society's institutions.

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